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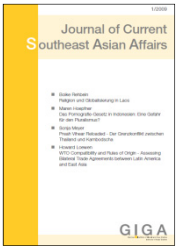

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The Smartphone as the "Weapon of the Weak": Assessing the Role of Communication Technologies in Malaysia's Regime Change

Ross Tapsell

Abstract: This paper examines the role of new communication technologies in the regime change of Malaysia's 2018 elections. I argue that growing Internet penetration in semi-rural areas of Malaysia's Peninsula "heartlands" allow for new forms of campaign message to be spread in unique and compelling ways. Facebook and instant-messenger platform WhatsApp are playing a prominent role in shaping political discourse in contemporary Malaysia, and this was evident in the election campaign that brought an end to Malaysia's ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional's, 60-year hold on power. In this article I use James Scott's (1987) *Weapons of the Weak* as the theoretical foundation for assessing the role of WhatsApp and other social media sites as tools of resistance, specifically in spreading information about the corruption and nepotism of Prime Minister Najib Razak and his wife, Rosmah Mansour. Given the prominence of the smartphone for news and information in Southeast Asia, this article explains how the digital era is changing the avenues via which the region receives and shares political information – as well as outlines the consequences that it brings for elections campaigns and democracy.

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Keywords: Malaysia, social media, politics, activism, election campaigning

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Introduction

Since the emergence of the Internet in the late 1990s, urban Malaysians have been highly innovative in online campaigning. Strategies such as email lists, alternative news sites, blogging, and social media have all been used to criticise the ruling powers and to push for a change of government. As such, Malaysia has been a crucial site for examining the role of new media in election campaigning. Scholars examining Malaysia to understand the extent to which new communication technologies assist with democratic reform have largely ended up explaining their limitations, citing the fact that – despite the rise of online activism in the country – Malaysia's ruling coalition was never able to be overthrown (Diamond 2010; Abbott 2011; Weiss 2013; Pepinsky 2013; Tapsell 2013a). Malaysia's stunning election results of 2018 prompts those of us examining digital media and politics to ask, then: What kind of communications technologies were prominent in the elections, and how were they used? Was there something happening in Malaysia's 2018 new media activist space that did not exist previously, and, if so, what?

This article argues that increased smartphone usage played an important role in political discourse in Malaysia's 2018 elections. In particular, both Facebook and WhatsApp – accessed predominantly via smartphones – were central sites for alternative news and views. This has always been the case in Malaysia, but in 2018 geographical areas previously seen as government-voter strongholds were now able to access the Internet. To what extent this mattered is difficult to measure precisely, but the rise of smartphones is leading to a shift in Malaysia's information society away from being passive consumers of mainstream media content and more towards being active participants in political discourse.

Fieldwork for this article was conducted in Malaysia – in the lead-up to and the aftermath of GE14 – in February, April, and July of 2018. Research included personal interviews with key political party social media strategists and professional online campaigners[1] in the capital, Kuala Lumpur, and in the state of Kedah, in northern Peninsula Malaysia. Kedah was considered a "swing state" and crucial to determining the outcome of the elections. Fieldwork in Kedah researching semi-rural communities included two weeks in April 2018 spent in Langkawi, Alor Setar, Guar

1 Interviews were conducted in English or Bahasa Malay. Where interviews were conducted in Bahasa Malay, all translations to English for this article have been undertaken by the author himself. Two respondents within the government's social media campaign team in Kuala Lumpur asked to speak on the condition of anonymity.

Chempedak, and Sedaka, which involved attending rallies, speaking with locals in these electorates, and meeting with campaign professionals and candidates. In addition to the fieldwork described above, I also asked campaign professionals if I could join some of their WhatsApp groups created for election campaigning. Material obtained from WhatsApp that helped in forming the argument presented here is discussed in due course.

By analysing recent data on Internet usage, interview material from campaigners, and some WhatsApp data, I shed light on the important role of new technologies in Malaysia's contemporary information society. Of course, as existing scholarship on new media technologies has explained, there is nothing inherently subversive about the Internet, social media, or the smartphone (Diamond 2010; Hill and Sen 2000). In fact, recent debates around "algorithmic enclaves" and "echo chambers" in Southeast Asia suggest that the smartphone and social media usage indeed have many negative effects on promoting identity politics (Grömping 2014; Lim 2017). But my argument here is that during Malaysia's GE14, increased smartphone usage allowed for greater subversion of authoritarian rule – and ultimately benefited the opposition, to help defeat a semi-authoritarian regime.

Malaysia's Shifting Information Society

Throughout this article I turn to the scholarship of anthropologist James Scott and his book *Weapons of the Weak* (1987), a pioneering text based on fieldwork he conducted in Kedah for a number of years during the 1980s. While much has changed in Malaysia's information and communications technologies since Scott wrote *Weapons of the Weak*, in many ways the avenues for power in Malaysia remains the same. Scott's argument that Malaysia's "semi-competitive election system […] requires the political support of the bulk of the Malay electorate" (Scott 1987: 314) largely stands correct in 2018 as well. Also remaining valid is his argument on ethnic Malay rule that:

> The main threat to the political hegemony of the ruling party has thus been concentrated largely in the poor, Malay, paddy-growing states of the north, where race is very much identified with economic function. (Scott 1987: 44)

In 2013 the government won the elections with 133 seats, but lost the popular vote. A total of 108 out of these 133 seats were considered "semi-rural" or "rural" ones. The opposition comprehensively won big cities, especially in and around the capital, Kuala Lumpur. In response, Prime

Minister Najib controversially dismissed the result as a "Chinese tsunami" against the government; in reality, however, this was an "urban tsunami" in areas where Internet penetration was most prevalent, and where alternative news and views were able to be circulated more widely than in the information societies of rural areas. The Barisan Nasional (BN) had known about this dichotomy for some time. In 2004 then Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi famously said "we lost the internet war" of GE12 (*Malaysiakini* 2008), while in 2013 Najib declared to urban campaigners that GE13 would be "the social media election" (*Free Malaysia Today* 2013).

In the lead-up to GE14, the opposition was still expected to win large majorities of urban, non-Malay votes. The key, as opposition campaigners and strategists realised, was to win over the "Malay heartlands" predominantly on the Peninsula. In fact, their strategy was to win 100 out of 112 seats in Peninsula Malaysia. The strategy was described by the opposition as the plan to cause a "Malay tsunami," a retort to Najib's aforementioned dismissive remark of 2013. The opposition initially held out little hope of winning many seats in Sabah and Sarawak – for a Malay tsunami to occur required constituencies of over 50 per cent ethnic Malay to abandon the BN, many for the first time in their lives, and switch their vote to the opposition instead.

While the Malay heartlands are not monolithic, in the lead-up to 2018 there were broad signs of a more fractious and disgruntled Malay electorate by now existing. One big difference in these communities between 2013 and 2018 was Internet access via the smartphone. Chinese-made Android smartphones have made significant headway into the Malaysian market (*The Star* 2017b), making the product a now more affordable purchase for middle- and lower-class Malaysians. In 2017 around 10 million smartphones were sold in Malaysia, with Samsung holding top market position; Chinese manufacturers Oppo, Vivo, and Huawei make a wider range of cheaper models, however (*Nikkei Asia Review* 2017). In 2017, MYR 7 billion in government subsidies was spent on the import of smartphones into Malaysia, as Prime Minister Najib felt the device was a "necessity" (Farhana Syed Nokman 2018). In 2012 the Malaysia Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) reported that while 77 per cent of adults had access to the Internet only 24.2 per cent of rural voters did (MCMC 2012: 11). By 2017 the MCMC was reporting that urban areas maintained a similar percentage of Internet access, compared with a huge growth to 57 per cent in rural ones. In short, Internet access had doubled in the rural areas of Malaysia since the previous general elections.

By 2018 over 70 per cent of Malaysians had access to the Internet, and around 90 per cent of those individuals were using a smartphone (MCMC 2018). Of these smartphone users, 90 per cent of respondents said they used the device "to get information" – in other words, not only to call and message friends and family. It is the growth in Malay semi-rural and rural areas that matters here. Prior to the last elections in 2013, only around 58 per cent of Internet users were ethnic Malay. In two years, that number had grown to 68 per cent (MCMC 2018) – and continued to increase going into election year too.

This growth allowed for online information dissemination into areas where previously the newspaper and television station had dominated. Globally, where Internet penetration is rising, newspaper circulation drops; the nature of the newspaper, namely as pro-government pamphlet, has assisted in this rapid decline in Malaysia, however (see Gomez, Anuar, and Lee 2017). The *New Straits Times*' daily circulation dropped from 120,000 readers in 2008 to 44,000 in 2016 (Audit Bureau of Circulations 2017). Media Prima, which owns the *New Straits Times* and is Malaysia's biggest media conglomerate owned by the government, reported a loss in 2017 of MYR 669 million (USD 172 million) (Zaharom 2018). Mainstream media, especially television, still plays an important role in Malaysia's media landscape, especially among the Malay population (90 per cent of the government-run TV3 audience is Malay) (Audit Bureau of Circulations 2017). But the expansion of smartphones, and increasingly 4G technology, cannot be ignored when assessing the contemporary media landscape in the country.

What are Malaysians doing on their smartphones? Malaysia has an estimated 22 million Facebook users, out of a population of 32 million people (Chinnasamy 2018). In 2017 the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University reported Malaysia being "the global leader for WhatsApp news usage," where just over half of news consumers surveyed in that country use the platform to "find, share or discuss news in a given week" (*The Star* 2017a). Their 2018 report asked Malaysians where they receive their news. Seventy-two per cent of Malaysians answered social media, 57 per cent television, 26 per cent radio, and 41 per cent print media. In "devices for news," 77 per cent answered "the smartphone" (Reuters Institute 2018: 132). Breaking down these statistics, 64 per cent of Malaysians said they gathered their news from Facebook and 54 per cent from WhatsApp – numbers far higher than for any other social media or instant-messenger platform (the next highest was Instagram at 33 per cent, with Twitter well below at 25 per cent). The report

showed that globally, news consumption was shifting even more towards WhatsApp (*Agence France Press* 2018).

Younger voters are important here. Around 47 per cent of Internet users in Malaysia are aged between 20 and 29, and another 25 per cent between 30 and 39; younger voters using smartphones were thus central to any election campaign (MCMC 2018). There was also a general belief among all campaigners – although it must be said this is unproven in the literature or research to date – that younger generations of voters in Malaysia returning home to the provinces had a significant ability to influence their parents' votes. One Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) government campaigner in Kedah said:

> We have problems understanding the decision of first-time voters, and this is because they all have smartphones. We can't rely on them to vote the way their parents voted or other family members vote because they are more individuals in terms of the information they receive through these devices. (Sanusi Latas, personal interview, Alor Setar, 8 April 2018)

As one villager in Kedah told me:

> Things are changing. My grandfather voted for PAS his whole life. My father voted for UMNO [United Malays National Organisation] his whole life. But me? I will choose the best candidate. (personal interview, Sedaka, 6 April 2018)

But who would voters see as the "best" candidate? Even in the days prior to the election, it was not clear who was likely to win.

To conclude, in Malaysia the opposition has long managed to utilise new media platforms to advocate for their cause. Their campaigning enabled them to win over voters with Internet access in urban areas, but prior to 2018 had little effect in winning over Malay heartland voters with limited or no Internet access. Alternative news and views distributed online (including at the most basic level, the speeches or comments of leading opposition figures) in these areas were less prominent than in urban areas with internet access. By 2018 the smartphone, and consequently Facebook and WhatsApp, were more widely used by ethnic Malay voters in non-urban areas. But smartphone usage and social media are not inherently pro-opposition spaces. Was the opposition campaigning more effective online, then? To answer this question, I use interviews with key campaign officials in the social media space in the lead-up to GE14.

WhatsApp and Facebook Campaigning in GE14

All political parties were well prepared for online campaigning during GE14. A feature of the 2013 elections was the Democratic Action Party's (DAP) online campaigning, dubbed by some as the "Red Bean Army"; in reality, though, their campaigners were far less organised than the name implies (Tapsell 2013b). In 2018 DAP did not have virulent supporters online, in part because ethnic Chinese support was less fervent once Mahathir was named opposition leader. Bee Yin was in charge of DAP's social media strategies in 2018. She confirmed that the DAP acquired phone numbers, and Facebook IDs linked to phone numbers, in order to send out messages throughout the course of the campaign. Fahmi Fadzil was the People's Justice Party's (PKR) social media strategist in 2013. In 2018 he ran as a member of parliament in Lembah Panti, but was still involved in social media strategies within the party. He had the following to say:

> Campaigning on WhatsApp is like white-water rafting, riding a raging torrent. You have neighbourhood groups, work groups, alumni groups, political interest groups. We need to try to make sure that we have someone in each of these groups. We can't create the groups. We instruct all of our members to make sure that they have state parliamentary level down to polling district level – various WhatsApp groups, in order to send information down. It's about either inserting yourself into your neighbourhood group [or] your club group. (Fahmi Fadzil, personal interview, Kuala Lumpur, 5 February 2018)

As in previous campaigns, the opposition was well aware of the impact that social media campaigning would have on the election.

But by GE14 the government was also far more involved in online campaigning. In 2013, Tun Faisal was central to forming the UMNO Cybertroopers Club. In the lead-up to the election campaign, he remarked that:

> We are doing better than in 2013. Our machinery was out of touch from the social media carriers at that time. The government and party machinery were too dependent on the traditional media. They had not updated themselves on new media. We learnt from the mistake of the previous election. (Tun Faisal, personal interview, Kuala Lumpur, 6 February 2018)

But he noted WhatsApp was central for campaigning in 2018, which meant "the terrain is just so different." He said that in the lead-up to the

campaign the government created "infrastructure and links" through the UMNO IT Bureau led by Amat Maslan, which then filters down through WhatsApp groups into the state and division levels of UMNO, disseminating information to their circles. This then then filters down to branch and ultimately village level, to village heads and imams – then getting passed to the grassroots communities.

> We coordinate our messaging through these online platforms. Previously we relied on blogs and Facebook, now the communication infrastructure of WhatsApp is core business. (Tun Faisal, personal interview, Kuala Lumpur, 6 February 2018)

Fahmi Fadzil agreed that the BN was doing more in the social media space than they had in 2013:

> The government initially thought WhatsApp was a threat to them. Initially the government would say "don't believe everything you say on WhatsApp." In response to the mass proliferation of information they have now embraced it. (personal interview, Kuala Lumpur, 5 February 2018)

Even the PAS, which dominates in rural areas of Malaysia, saw it as crucial to be more involved in spreading information online during GE14. PAS's vice president, Iskandar Abdul Samad, commented that he had conducted a study of his constituency through the Institute Darul Islam and found that 80 per cent of voters are connected to some form of social media:

> Even if you go to the most rural constituencies, some people have got some access to Internet and social media. Some people have two handphones. You are connectable everywhere. It's not only the young, but [also] the middle-aged. Even older people are into social media. (Iskandar, personal interview, Shah Alam, 7 February 2018)

Iskandar developed a system whereby he can send thousands of messages to voters through WhatsApp, because if an issue is going to be created "it won't be on television, it will be on social media." He claimed that many people "don't want to keep up with all the latest developments [of GE14], they just see what's on Facebook and WhatsApp" (Iskandar, personal interview, Shah Alam, 7 February 2018).

Of course, smartphones were not the only "battlefield" for winning over voters in GE14. As Scott explained, UMNO's system relied on a "well-organised and well-financed political machine providing individual and collective blandishments that reach into every Malay village" (Scott 1987: 57). This itself is dependent on "various forms of patronage, and its privileged access to the institutions that distribute that patronage" (Scott

1987: 136). Further research from anthropologists and political scientists could uncover how these systems of patronage and a well-organised machine fractured and even crumbled as Mahathir formed a rival ethnic Malay party. Nevertheless, in my interviews with campaign officials in Kedah in the lead-up to the elections a prominent concern was their increased inability to manage and manipulate the channels of information flowing into semi-rural Malay areas.

Knowing the power of these platforms after the election results of 2008 and of 2013, all political parties introduced initiatives to pump out their own information on these sites and to criticise the opposition online. The question remains, then, as to why was the opposition successful in winning this election, rather than the government? Speaking after the election campaign, Tai Zee Kin – who was part of Prime Minister Najib's social media campaign team throughout GE14 – observed that "the opposition was more sophisticated and eloquent in making content go viral on WhatsApp," while the BN campaigners were, in his opinion, focused on pumping out content online in similar ways to traditional media that was "inorganic" and "official." He explained further that the opposition did a better job of posting photos and video clips with short headlines inciting and enraging viewers, such as "Can you condone this stupid behaviour by a minister?" He added:

> People share content on WhatsApp when they feel excited, angry, funny, or they have sympathy. Emotional attributions are important. That's what creating WhatsApp content is all about. (Zee Kin, personal interview, Kuala Lumpur, 15 July 2018)

Thus, winning the "social media war" is not simply a matter of the amount of official campaign material being disseminated by political parties and their social media professionals, but also of producing the type of content that makes citizens share with their friends and family "organically." To delve more deeply into this issue we need to identify what kinds of information are spread via WhatsApp and Facebook, and the type of digital public sphere that is now emerging via smartphone technologies.

The Smartphone as a "Weapon of the Weak"

In this section I try to better understand GE14's digital public sphere, which as I have argued above is largely driven by smartphone usage. I posit that the smartphone was used as a "weapon of the weak" in order to question the legitimacy of Prime Minister Najib and to subvert the dominant messages of the BN campaign. This conclusion comes from interviews

with campaign professionals, fieldwork in Kedah, and from being "embedded" in numerous WhatsApp groups during GE14. The WhatsApp groups that I was a part of during Malaysia's GE14 campaign were anonymous in that, unless they declared it in the group, people's origins, age, gender, and professional background were not clear.[2] Thus, this research is not representative of Malaysia's national WhatsApp or social media discourse. For a start, the conversations were only in English or Bahasa Malay, and never in Chinese or Tamil. Second, to join the group respondents had to be quite interested in discussing politics, as over 1,000 messages would be sent in a single day (although it was clear not everyone was engaging regularly in the discussions, so people "switched on and off" throughout the day or week).

The material presented here is, then, simply one sample of how WhatsApp discourse played out during GE14. In many ways this was different to a lot of WhatsApp communications, which were more private conversations between family members and friends. Yet the material being shared on these sites, and the discussions that ensued, give us some sense of how this new digital public sphere operates. There is surprisingly little research on instant-messenger chat groups and politics, and this article is an attempt to fill this gap in some small way.

The discussions on these groups largely remained national; respondents only rarely talked about local politics. Occasionally respondents identified themselves as being from certain regions of Malaysia to provide a local context to a national issue, but it was rare that groups discussed local political candidates or local party policies in any depth. Further research could examine more localised WhatsApp groups. Joining simply meant being added by the administrator, in most cases being put in touch directly through a political campaigner who was already part of the group; in some cases, a group invitation was sent out on one WhatsApp group for anyone to join a different one. The maximum number of people WhatsApp allows in a group is 256, and the ones used for this article typically consisted of this maximum number of individuals. Material from the campaign period, running from 19 April until election day on 16 May, was exported from WhatsApp into a Word document, and analysed individually by the author. These exported documents typically contained between 200,000 and 250,000 words.

Facebook pages on GE14 were collated by the author from conversations on WhatsApp, whereby a link was usually provided by someone in

2 Authors of comments on threads simply came up in my phone as random Malaysian numbers.

one of the large groups. Around 50 per cent of Facebook pages posted on WhatsApp were videos, often of political leaders giving speeches or rallies, or short campaign advertisements. The rest of the material was usually an article that someone had read online, or a post that was public and was being spread around on WhatsApp. As such, I argue that while Facebook was central for the creation and distribution of material for GE14, as we shall see in the material below, WhatsApp provided important insights into how people responded to material – meaning, what they thought about issues being discussed in GE14.

Gossip

In his seminal work *Weapons of the Weak*, political anthropologist James Scott wrote extensively about the role of rumour and gossip in semi-authoritarian Malaysia as "symbolic resistance" and "a kind of democratic 'voice' in conditions where power and possible repression make open acts of disrespect dangerous" (Scott 1987: 282). "Gossip is never disinterested," he wrote, "it is a partisan effort (by class, faction, family) to advance its claims and interests against those of others" (Scott 1987: 282). Gossip is a central part of subversive communication under Malaysia's BN regime. As Scott writes:

> For the poor […] gossip achieves the expression of opinion, of contempt, of disapproval while minimizing the risks of identification and reprisal. Malicious gossip symbolically chips away at the reputations of the rich […] in the same fashion that anonymous thefts in the night materially chip away at the property of the rich, and is one of the few means available to a subordinate class to clothe the practice of resistance with the safe disguise of outward compliance. (Scott 1987: 282)

Gossip, rumour, and conspiracy played a central part in Malaysia's GE14, not only in-person but also online – more specifically, on Facebook and WhatsApp.

The main "gossip" in the context of GE14 was Najib and his wife's personal wealth, linked to 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) corruption scandals. As one government social media campaigner, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, told me:

> Rosmah is always in the top-ten talked-about issues online. We have had to give up stopping negative content. If we put out alternative content, it just leads to more negative comments, so we stopped trying. (personal interview, Kuala Lumpur, 3 February 2018)

Discussion of first lady Rosmah was central to the dissent against Najib's government. It was related to wealth, status, and entitlement, but the gendered nature of the discourse whereby the woman is responsible for the exorbitant spending cannot be ignored. The goods and services tax (GST) "goes to Rosmah" so she can buy clothes, jewellery, and travel was a constant quip made in WhatsApp conversations. Comments like "I won't be pinched with the rising cost of living to save Rosmah" were common. Another one that "freedom fighters did not fight for independence so Rosmah can buy expensive bags" also exemplifies the discussion of the first lady on WhatsApp. Rosmah was said to have had an office in the prime minister's building, from where she rather than Najib made most of the decisions. Serious discussions revolved around Rosmah's purchasing of expensive *cincin* (rings), claims that were occasionally refuted by BN supporters who sent links from mainstream media reporting that Rosmah never purchased any such items. She was said by some in the group to have "anything she wants." Others satirically wrote "a vote for Najib is a vote for Rosmah," and often the most unpopular decisions were attributed to her by people within the groups. The discourse whereby Rosmah was front and centre of a corruption scandal relates strongly to the way in which other controversial Southeast Asian first ladies were derided by the populace, such as Imelda Marcos of the Philippines (famous for owning thousands of pairs of shoes) and Madame Tien Suharto (colloquially known by Indonesians as Madame "Ten Percent," for the taxes that allegedly went straight to her bank account).

Much of this gossip was unsubstantiated by Facebook pages or news articles. Rosmah was "never in a *ceramah* [public discussion]," which led to more speculation of where she actually was – such as being "seen leaving the country with bags of $$$$." Regular quips revolved around Rosmah's hair, for example. Other comments such as this were made:

> Is Najib really under Rosmah's thumb? Coz I'd believe Rosmah got it bad during from Najib after the stunt she pulled sitting between the married couple during Datuk Lee's wedding. After that I seem to notice a great reduction in her appearance publicly.[3]

While debates and counterarguments were common in these groups, only a few pro-BN supporters bothered to come to Rosmah's defence. One wrote "I'd like to arrange a meeting so you can see what she is really like," and occasionally anti-Rosmah chat was responded to by others as "juvenile." Overall, gossip about Rosmah was central to discussion on

3 For the sake of anonymity, all such quotations from WhatsApp group chats are not specifically referenced.

WhatsApp – far more so than for other political or campaign figures, and it was almost always negative in nature.

Conversations about Rosmah exemplified the subversive nature of WhatsApp communication via the smartphone. These were not discussions that were spurred on by mainstream media coverage or by explicit political campaign messages from the opposition. Rather, this was "malicious gossip symbolically to chip away at the rich," as Scott (1987: 282) writes. This is not to say there is no evidence for Rosmah's wealth and corruption – in the aftermath of the elections, police raided the apartment of Najib and Rosmah and, indeed, found thousands of handbags – but at the time of the election campaign the discussions were based largely on gossip (some of which turned out to be true) and slander. The content may have been justifiable, but the way that it was spread shows how gossip via the smartphone can be a weapon of the weak.

Conspiracy

When Kedahans I spoke with discussed the general election, invariably they began to talk about Najib and the 1MDB wealth fund controversy. When I subsequently asked where they got their information from (given Malaysia's mainstream media mostly avoids reporting this issue), they would almost always say Facebook or WhatsApp. Details of Najib's 1MDB corruption scandal, repressed, as noted, in the mainstream media, spread frequently on social media and messenger applications. While there was a general belief in Malaysia that the details of 1MDB were too complex to resonate in rural towns and villages, the message of government corruption was clearly spread far and wide.

The Malaysian government consistently tried to produce differing forms of information on the 1MDB issue. They created documents that said the money was a donation from the Saudis, that 1MDB was actually not in debt, that the story was "fake news." One BN campaigner told me:

> 1MDB is hard to stop. All we can do is put out material saying what the Saudis said, denying it, and making enough doubt in the voter minds that this is all "political" rather than factual. (personal interview, 2 February 2018)

For example, 1MDB president Arul Kanda Kandasamy (appointed in 2015) would embark on a nationwide roadshow to explain the 1MDB issue ahead of the polls earlier this year. He reportedly told attendees that the investment fund was a "business issue," and urged politicians not to "politicise" issues related to 1MDB ahead of the general election (*Utusan Malaysia* 2018).

There was significant and fervent political debate around 1MDB in the WhatsApp groups that I had access to. At one point in one group, someone asked for "ground rules for no more 1MDB discussions." The basic discussions on all groups were based around pro-BN supporters claiming there was no evidence to accuse Najib of personally stealing funds, while pro-opposition supporters accused him and the government of covering up this financial crime. The image of Najib as a "thief" became prominent during the campaign. Numerous cartoons, memes, and images were shared of him with a thief mask, sack of money over his shoulder, or with cash in his pocket stealing from the populace. Stories relating to 1MDB were shared regularly on Facebook and WhatsApp. From the comments, respondents either used these stories as evidence that the Malaysian government was covering up crime (with explicit support from the government-owned Malaysian mainstream media) or, alternatively, the media was "biased" and was using 1MDB to attack the Malaysian government – whom their own countries did not like.

Were citizens likely to believe that Najib was implicated in 1MDB, despite him denying any wrongdoing? Regardless of many believing the issue was indeed politicised, numerous Malaysians linked the 1MDB issue to how they themselves felt about the country. Many reflected on how times seemed to be better for Malaysia under previous governments (including Mahathir), and in their minds – given that the economy was in a more difficult position now – this was perhaps due to the misspending of government funds. For example, one person on WhatsApp wrote:

> TunM [Mahathir] got Klia [KL International airport) got klcc [kuala lumpur convention centre which includes the twin towers] [...] 1mdb [...] wang sudah keluar [...] Mana bangunan nyaa? [1MDG […] the money is gone […] where is the development?]

Another citizen expressed a useful discussion of 1MDB as being linked to the current state of the Malaysian economy in his or her mind:

> […] honestly speaking 1MDB issue or whatever rasuah cincin issue I dun really care if as long as I live in a country which I can live comfortably financially or environmentally in my country , but now look at norm , middle income group are slowly disappearing and low income not need to said d they r worse in the situation, well ,salary still the same why am the norm suffering there is because poor management economy of this country, norm are whole life in debt , and always in news social media show that rasuah cincin 1MDB issue , as a norm will you be piss? Will you [name removed]? Some more is tax payer money.

When discussion was raised about Najib's policy of doing business deals with China, many defended him for improving Malaysia's economy. But the Chinese connections were again related to 1MDB, and how he needed to sell off Malaysian assets to pay debts. As one citizen in a pro-BN group wrote regarding the business deals with China:

> [I]f no scandal then ok la [...] now got donor 2.6b scandle [sic] 1mdb [...] got luxury watches [...] no income tax prove [sic] [...] sure ppl in the street dont [sic] accept.

Anthropologists elsewhere in Southeast Asia have written about how "rumor is subversive […] not when its content is directed against the government, but when the source is believed *not* to be the government" (Sigel 1994: 63, italics in the original). Under a regime that shackles and restricts the mainstream media, the practice of passing on information, rumour, and gossip becomes a heightened aspect of being an informed citizen – in order to understand the real story. A non-government source, particularly if it is someone that you trust, hence becomes more believable.

Denials from government officials and counter-narratives from government-owned mainstream media often have the reverse effect: they confirm to the populace that there is something suspicious going on. For example, when *Utusan Malaysia* (2011) published a front page story saying Rosmah used her own money to purchase an expensive ring, having saved up for it since she was a child, it simply solidified the idea to many Malaysians that she had in fact purchased it using state funds. This *Utusan* story circulated widely on Facebook throughout GE14, but often as a joke or meme at Rosmah's expense.

Najib's Response: The "Anti-Fake News Bill"

In response to the wide array of alternative news and views being shared on Facebook and WhatsApp in the lead-up to the campaign period, the Najib government hastily drafted and passed the so-called Anti-Fake News Bill. It vaguely defined the phenomenon as "news, information, data and reports which are wholly or partly false," carrying a fine of more than USD 100,000 and up to six years in jail. It covered reports published in Malaysia or by foreign nationals overseas, as long as they related to news about Malaysia or a Malaysian citizen. Understandably, civil society groups complained that this was a crackdown on Malaysian netizens criticising the government – in particular on those spreading information about 1MDB (see *Quartz* 2018).

The anti-fake news law had a significant impact on the political discourse in the WhatsApp groups that I was embedded in. People regularly

accused others of spreading fake news, and demanded that they retract statements. They warned others that they could go to jail for spreading fake news. If they did not agree with an event or detail that someone else wrote, they often replied with the comment "fake news." Many citizens supported the idea that the government would crack down on those who were doing what they saw as spreading fake news. They saw offering what did not align with their own opinion (whether pro-BN or pro-opposition) as being largely spreading fake news.

This partisanship around the flow of information leads to a more polarised political discourse on chat groups, and the concerning trend that citizens threatened to (and perhaps did) report each other to the police if they shared material on a WhatsApp one. In one group, a citizen wrote: "I am going to the police station to report a few today. The fake news in this group also I will report together." This was met with shock but also agreement from those who supported the person's political views. In many ways, the government's objective in creating the bill – to stifle dissent – had a direct impact in that it provided a means by which citizens online could threaten each other; if implemented earlier, with more significant cases of individuals being arrested (perhaps for criticising the government or the prime minister), it would have had a seriously chilling effect on online discourse.

However, there was also much to admire in the way that citizens subverted the Anti-Fake News Bill in messenger groups. If we take the above argument that the sharing of rumour, gossip, and conspiracy is a subversive tactic to reduce the legitimacy of the ruling government, and the subsequent Anti-Fake New Bill a response to negate some of this content online, then citizens who got around the chilling effect of the bill were also advancing the subversion. For example one citizen posted a story about "rumours surrounding the attorney-general," writing: "Sharing here solely as fiction, I am not spreading fake news. I don't believe in it, but read it and see the cerita [story] dongeng […]." Others described WhatsApp as a place to "verify" other news circulating on Facebook and on the Internet. They often posted with "pls [please] verify fake or not" before sharing details, or "they say fake news but sharing here for information." There were many such stories circulated which were anti-government, complete with additional comments such as: "true or not?"; "sharing only fyi [for your information] not sure if true"; and much more. The compound effect of sending such messages on WhatsApp was to encourage others to also share memes and stories on the platform as well.

Why does this matter? This discourse shows that many citizens continued to share anti-government information even in larger groups where

they did not know everyone, and even in ones where people threatened to report them for fake news – but they did so through what Scott terms "feigned ignorance," another weapon of the weak. The rumours, conspiracies, gossip, and slander continued, and were a central part of election discourse on instant-messenger groups. Thus, my argument here is that the subversive tactics used on WhatsApp were a digitised weapon of the weak. In defining the "ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups," Scott writes of "foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth" (1987: 29). In the digital era, weapons of the weak in Malaysia included gossip, rumour, conspiracy, feigning ignorance, generating uncertainty, casting doubt, and subverting state authorities – all predominantly done digitally, through smartphones, social media platforms, and chat applications.

Conclusion: The Smartphone and Democracy

What does Malaysia's regime change tell us about the role of technology in bringing down semi-authoritarian regimes? First, Larry Diamond was right when – in analysing the role of "liberation technologies in Malaysia" – he wrote: "If a transition occurs, it will be mainly due to political factors – the coalescence of an effective opposition and the blunders of an arrogant regime" (2010: 73). Certainly, these two factors came together in 2018. Yet this arguably also occurred in 2013 too; in any case, despite these obvious factors in the lead-up to the 2018 election, the leading political scientists of Malaysia did not predict this outcome. Further debate within this space remains the realm of political scientists studying political party coalitions and regime change, and so is beyond the scope of this article. To be sure, the opposition successfully connected 1MDB and government corruption to broader issues of the rising cost of living and of taxes (in particular GST) – and thus a ruling government that was in power for 60 years was finally, and comprehensively, voted out. But in the "race between democrats seeking to circumvent internet censorship and dictatorships that want to extend and refine it" (Diamond 2010: 81), did the democrats win this round in Malaysia?

This research has argued that the smartphone was used extensively to circumvent mainstream media discourse, and as a subversive device for circulating anti-government messages. In 2018, geographical areas in Peninsula Malaysia such as Kuala Lumpur, Johor, Ipoh, Malacca, and Seberang Perai were now able to host 4G technology – meaning faster download speeds and ultimately increased usage of the Internet via smartphones by voters in those areas (see *Open Signal* 2018). For all their (serious) flaws

around data privacy and the spread of disinformation, Facebook and WhatsApp were common ways that citizens in the rural and semi-rural heartlands of Malaysia received alternative news and views on their smartphones in Malaysia. Facebook was *the* central place to see images of Mahathir at rallies and watching his speeches live, but also for Malaysians to regularly read fervent criticism of Prime Minister Najib and the Barisan Nasional. Thus the smartphone, and with it Facebook and WhatsApp, was a space for alternative information, but crucially also for gossip, slander, jokes, and disagreements – and, in Scott's theory, for "words, feints and counterfeints, threats, a skirmish or two, and, above all, propaganda" (1987: 3). All of this is part of a more subversive public sphere brought about by digitalisation and personal handsets. These are all part of Scott's weapons of the weak, which "require little or no coordination or planning" (Scott 1987: 184) – but rather simple activity via messages and social media.

When "liberation technology" scholars write about regime change, their arguments are often framed in terms of "social media revolutions" – whereby alternative sources of news create spontaneous street protests, resulting in a spectacular crumbling of a regime overthrown by a fervent democratic revolt. This is fuelled by what Castells (2009) calls "networks of outrage and hope," in this instance digital ones. Malaysia's use of liberation technology to bring about regime change is far more timid and hidden, but no less subversive. Rather than through a spontaneous online movement to bring down the government, Malaysia's regime was defeated peacefully through the ballot box after numerous previously close attempts – specifically as a result of the online "tenacity of self-preservation in ridicule, in truculence, in irony, in petty acts of noncompliance" (Scott 1987: 350).

Of course former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, aged 92 at the time of his election victory, strikes a peculiar figure as Malaysia's champion of democracy, and thus call into the question whether Malaysia's voters were on Facebook and WhatsApp as tools of democracy or because they believed that they were voting for a similar regime but with a different leader – and one who has been part of that regime previously. The answer would depend on the individual voter, and subsequent research and trends in Malaysian politics will shed further light on this issue. In the northern Malaysian semi-rural and rural areas that I visited, few spoke of voting for the opposition in order to advance democracy.

This is where Scott's research has more meaning than that of those of us who have written about the previous limitations of new technologies in bringing about democratic reform. Scott argues that we should not assume that subversive discourse is always "principled" or "selfless," and

indeed GE14 should not necessarily be seen as a victory for a visionary pro-democracy movement. The nationwide vote to oust the Najib Razak-led BN was also one of material needs seen broadly as to do with the rising cost of living, and bread-and-butter issues such as the struggle over the appropriation of work, production, property, and taxes; in GE14's case, the explicit policy platform of the opposition to abolish the GST. But, as Scott writes, these are "the essence of lower-class politics and resistance" (1987: 296).

Scott shone light on and celebrated "the steady, grinding efforts to hold one's own against overwhelming odds, a spirit and practice that prevents the worst and promises something better" (Scott 1987: 350), but also argued that these weapons of the weak were largely what occurred "between revolts." Here I have argued these weapons of the weak were, in fact, part of the revolt in Malaysia's GE14. Nevertheless, there is nothing inherently "democratic" about some of these forces and techniques. While Facebook and WhatsApp triumphantly undermined the government-controlled mainstream media in semi-authoritarian Malaysia, at the same time these platforms are also complicit in the declining popular trust in professional journalism in democratic countries like the Philippines and Indonesia, for example. As mainstream media loses credibility, Facebook and WhatsApp content is becoming ever-more successful in shaping political discourse. The digital era is changing the avenues through which we receive information. Given the prominence of the smartphone for news and information in Southeast Asia, we should look to this region to see what these new "communities" look like – and how society is now changing.

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